The Colorful History of the TP&W

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The colorful history of the TP&W Railroad includes one of the worst wrecks in American history, the only railroad whose President was assassinated, the longest railroad strike in history, and one of the worst railroad explosions in America.

Initially, this railroad was chartered in 1849 and named the Peoria and Oquawka Railroad. The goal was to provide a rail connection between the Illinois River in Peoria and the Mississippi River. After this goal was accomplished, the railroad laid tracks from Peoria east to the Indiana border. Fairbury was founded in 1857 when the railroad came through Livingston County.

After several name changes, in 1864, the railroad was renamed to the TP&W (Toledo, Peoria, and Warsaw). This railroad never actually ran to Toledo. Sixteen years later, in 1880, the name was changed to the Toledo, Peoria, and Western Railroad.

In the 1880s, the railroads got the idea to offer excursion trips to scenic locations like Niagara Falls. In 1887, one of these TP&W Niagara Falls excursion trains derailed in Chatsworth. The Great Chatsworth train wreck still ranks as the 7th worst wreck in American history in terms of fatalities.

During World War I, virtually all major U.S. railroads, including the TP&W, were placed under federal control by the United States Railroad Administration (USRA) starting in late 1917 and early 1918 to improve wartime efficiency. This system-wide control included smaller regional lines like the TP&W, which were operated as part of the national network until they were returned to private ownership in 1920 under the Transportation Act of 1920.

In the mid-1920s, railroads started to lose money. Passengers began using automobiles for travel, and newly paved state highways allowed trucks to haul freight that had previously been hauled by railroads. In 1926, the TP&W was purchased for $1.3 million by George P. McNear Jr., who was a former New York Central (NYC) executive and investor. The purchase price of $1.3M in 1926 is equivalent to $23,510,316 in today's dollars.

McNear took many actions, including selling a terminal, raising capital by issuing bonds, discontinuing passenger and mail operations, and marketing the TP&W to avoid the busy Chicago and St. Louis hubs. Passenger service in Fairbury was discontinued in 1933, and the depot was torn down shortly after. The bricks from the depot were used to build the Apostolic Church at the northeast corner of South 8th Street and East Elm Street.

Because of McNear's astute management, the TP&W was one of the few railroads to be profitable during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Despite his successful efforts to reorganize the TP&W, McNear became unpopular with labor unions. He enforced his own personalized labor rules and methods, to which all thirteen of the TP&W-tied unions disagreed, and they initiated multiple unsuccessful labor strikes to restore the railway's previous conventional rules.

On December 28, 1941, another TP&W strike was initiated after the TP&W announced a new wage scale and another new set of rules. The strike was quickly ended on March 21, 1942, when U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the federal government to take control of the TP&W to have the railway aid the ongoing World War II effort. John W. Barriger III was appointed their federal manager. This change in control marked the second time in history that the Federal Government had taken over the TP&W.

In 1945, after World War II ended, control of the TP&W was returned to George McNear, but the thirteen unions immediately reinitiated the strike, thereby shutting down the railway. The strike lasted for nineteen months, and it involved multiple shootings; on two separate occasions, some gunshots were fired into an automobile with non-union employees and into a locomotive cab; on February 6, 1946, some armed guards hired by the TP&W shot five strikers (two killed; three wounded) at Gridley, Illinois.

In December 1946, federal judge J. Leroy Adair ordered the TP&W to resume operations and issued an injunction to prevent interference by strikers.

On the night of March 10, 1947, George McNear was shot and killed by an assassin with a shotgun while walking back to his home from a Bradley Braves basketball game during a power outage. McNear's murder case remains unsolved, but it was believed to be connected to the lengthy strike.

Following McNear's death, the TP&W fell under the control of McNear estate trustees, and Frisco Railway executive J. Russell Coulter became the TP&W's newest President. In May 1947, Coulter restored most of the older labor rules, and the strike quickly ended. This labor stoppage was one of the longest strikes in American railroad history.

The labor strike disputes resulted in 50% of TP&W's traffic being lost, and they led some traffic employees and executives to leave the company. By the early 1950s, however, the railway regained its lost traffic and profitability under Coulter's leadership.

Catastrophe struck the TP&W on June 21, 1970, in Crescent City, Illinois. This tragedy was the derailment of a Toledo, Peoria & Western (TP&W) freight train that led to multiple propane tank cars exploding and burning for more than two days. Those explosions destroyed or damaged a large part of Crescent City's downtown area and injured more than 60 people, but remarkably, there were no fatalities. The incident became a landmark case in hazardous materials firefighting and railroad safety because of the dramatic boiling liquid expanding vapor (BLEVE) explosions of the propane tanks.

After the 1970 Crescent City explosion, the TP&W continued to experience changes in ownership. The last significant change was in 2012, when Genesee & Wyoming Inc. (G&W) acquired RailAmerica, gaining ownership of the TP&W, and began repainting all of its locomotives in G&W's orange-and-black paint scheme.

In 2018, Fairbury volunteers painted the TP&W shed just south of the Post Office white with green trim. New TP&W signs were printed and installed using the older TP&W logo.

Green Frog Productions is a company that makes historical DVDs of many different American railroads. Their DVD about the history of the DVD can be purchased at https://tinyurl.com/d2chvh4d. This DVD features an image of the first steam locomotive purchased by the TP&W. It was used to create the colorful steam locomotive shown on the historical mural in Veterans' Memorial Park.

Over the 168 years that Fairbury and the TP&W have existed, many Fairbury residents worked for the TP&W Railroad, and many retired after long careers. In many ways, the history of the TP&W and Fairbury is very closely intertwined.

In 2018, volunteers from the Fairbury Improvement Group repainted the TP&W operations building just south of the Post Office. New signs including the use of the older TP&W logo replaced the worn out existing signage.